

Thoughts on love and marriage



*I wish you were here, dear,
I wish you were here.
I wish I knew no astronomy
when stars appear...*

– from [*The Song*](#), Joseph Brodsky

Statistically, they don't seem to "[go together like a horse and carriage](#)." Not according to experts. Worse, even when such socially sanctioned commitments persist "until death parts," not often is it *happily*. Other prudential excuses intervene. The funny thing is that not even divorce lawyers are immune from thinking otherwise. Ask them on their wedding day when their divorce is scheduled, they, like non-divorce lawyers, say that only happens to other couples. Roughly half of all marriages end in divorce. Of those that don't, two-thirds of these endure for reasons having little to do with the same feelings given at the time of their inception. Instead, cited are children, material or emotion dependence, fear of loneliness, of not being able to do better... *but fear of this or that is not romantic*.

About [17% of couples](#) *do* make it *happily* to the end. Given all that stands in the way, that is an amazing stat, and probably requires a more ontologically tortured explanation.¹

1. It suggests that *the* individuals who married somehow cease being *those same* individuals as a result of the success of the relationship. A transformation happens, which raises a form of the Parfitian non-identity problem. It is not that the marriage between *two* endures; it is that the *two* become existentially *one*. There is a merging that obviates the individuals who once married. But conditions have to be exactly right for this to happen, and – while perhaps it is – it is not obvious *why* this outcome *should* be a good thing. When the institution of marriage was invented lives were very short. Many women died in childbirth. The rigors of provisioning killed off men early. Marriage, originally about establishing protocol for land

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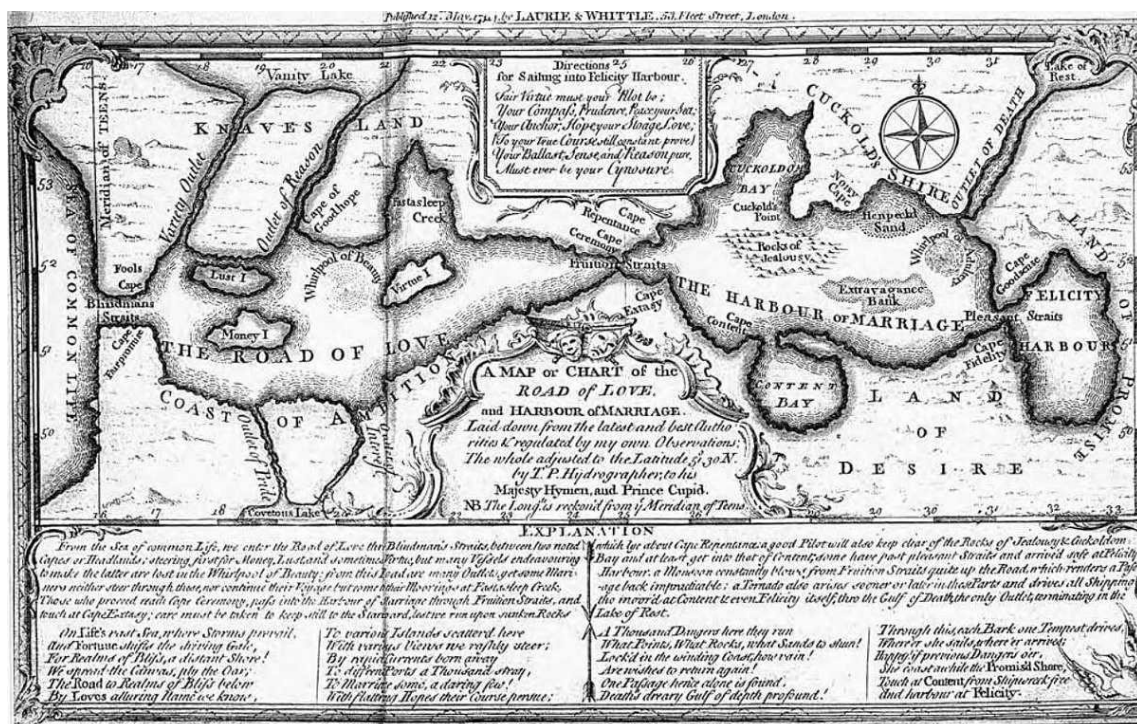
(A recurring theme across many of my topics is how *little* the part is that rationality plays in human experience or practice – from who you vote for to what you believe. Nowhere else is this clearer than in intimate relationships.)

Marriage is a social/legal construction. While it once served an important function, is it still relevant? Marriage, the institution, always involves a third party: the state or some similar norm-dispensing ossified community institution. It is not the same as “pair-bonding.” There are perfectly sensible reasons why these form, but they don’t necessarily involve third parties or beliefs about “forever,” etc...

We do not intend to celebrate rationality above all else or trash the human need to be entranced by something or someone or other. Just that some lucidity on these matters *may* help. *Help what?*...

The map of love

“[Map or Chart of the Road of Love, and Harbour of Marriage](#)” published by “T.P. Hydrographer, to his Majesty Hymen, and Prince Cupid” in 1772.



The “Explanation” below the map reads:

succession, had no need to last very long to serve its function. Death often came before any thought of separation. We live too long and are exposed to too much opportunity for the institution to remain *rationaly* justifiable.

From the Sea of Common Life, we enter the Road of Love thro' Blindmans Straits, between two noted Capes or Headlands; steering first for Money, Lust, and sometimes Virtue, but many Vessels endeavouring to make the latter are lost in the Whirlpool of Beauty; from this Road are many outlets, yet some Mariners neither steer through these, nor continue their Voyage but come to their Moorings at Fastasleep Creek. Those who proceed reach Cape Ceremony, pass into the Harbour of Marriage through Fruition Straits and touch at Cape Extasy; care must be taken to keep still to the Starboard, lest we run upon sunken Rocks which lye about Cape Repentance; a good Pilot will also keep clear of the Rocks of Jealousy & Cuckoldom Bay and at least get into that of Content, some have past pleasant Straits and have arrived safe at Felicity Harbour, a Monsoon constantly blows from Fruition Straits quite up the Road, which renders a Passage back impracticable; a Tornado also arises sooner or later in those Parts and drives all Shipping tho moor'd at Content & even Felicity itself, thro the Gulf of Death, the only Outlet, terminating in the Lake of Rest.

Provocative interviews with “experts” on the formation and dissolution of romantic relationships:

- [“A Divorce Attorney’s Thoughts On Love and Marriage - James Sexton,”](#) Soft White Underbelly interview with James Sexton, divorce attorney in New York City.
- [“A Psychologist's Thoughts on Love and Marriage - Sadia Khan” Part 1, Part 2,](#) Soft White Underbelly interview with Sadia Khan, psychologist in London and Dubai.
- [“A Psychologist's Thoughts on Love and Marriage - Orion Taraban, Psy.D.” Part 1, Part 2](#) and, for good measure: [“Why Beautiful Women Are Nuts and Successful Men Are Assh*les,”](#) Soft White Underbelly interviews with Orion Taraban, psychologist in the San Francisco Bay area.
- [“Buber and Irigaray and bedroom ethics,”](#) Abi Doukhan, Queens’ College (CUNY), offers relevant insights in this recorded lecture on Martin Buber and Luce Irigaray. A premise in this discussion is a confrontation with the *difference* between the self and the other, and what this means for a relationship.
- [“Divorce Author: ‘I Think 17% of Marriages Are Happy’”](#) Interview with Dana Adam Shapiro who “says talking to people about their divorces actually made him more optimistic about marriage – but he still thinks truly happy ones are in the minority.”

Appendix

1. Notes from [Part 2 of the interview with Orion Taraban](#) (compiled by Olivia Dresher)

(Remarks in **red and bold** are mine.)

- “Love is the humiliated self exulted.” **[See below for more on this idea.]**

- “Relationships need things like boundaries & rules & definitions. Love doesn’t give a shit about any of that stuff.”
- “Love is hard. Love is not a soft, cuddly thing... Love is an invitation to self-transcendence. It’s an invitation to become more than yourself... The larger the sacrifice, the larger the love... Love will destroy you... You will have to grow up... You will have to think of something more than yourself... Love is found in solitude, in defeat... It’s found in the gutters...”
- “Is it better to be loved or to love?... Love will turn you inside-out, it will destroy who you think you are in the same way that the cocoon destroys the caterpillar... What happens in there isn’t pretty, the caterpillar actually gets liquified... The cocoon is a tomb...”
- “If you love until the relationship ends, did you really love at all? ... Love is not about wedding cakes & marriages & Valentine’s Day & flowers & candies & chocolates... The sacrifice of love will take everything from you but it will, in some way, make you immortal...” **[If you loved someone in your past you are no longer with, did you really love them? If they still haunt your life, maybe you did. If you manage ever to “get over” them, you never did.]**
- “Sexuality is completely inappropriate in respectful situations... As a man, it’s really hard to fuck someone you love... Fucking requires aggression, objectification, compartmentalization... You can’t fuck as a whole person... The more we get emotionally involved with you, the harder it is to fuck you...” **[Perhaps this is rooted in a deep psychological taboo about having sex with your mother: the subject of the first and most formidable emotional connection males have with a female. All other women a man will ever encounter cannot displace this one – except as more distant, less intimate, more abstract objects. As one philosopher put it, a man wants to reenter a place like the one from which he emerged but only a small part of him still fits.^{2]}**
- “God is laughing at us because he couldn’t have made men and women more different...”
- A sexual rejection = the woman saying “I don’t think you should reproduce... I think that you should go extinct.”
- “Women’s greatest enemy is pride... For women, sex is the fruit of the tree... For men, sex is the seed...”
- “Romantic love is not really conducive to successful relationships... It’s a fall from grace... But now we consider romantic love as a goal, which is insane... Seeking out a soulmate is like seeking out a distortion, a disease...”
- “Why bind your heart to another mortal creature who will fail you? Why love someone who doesn’t deserve it, for who does?”

2. [*Tweets from Hell*](#), Bianco Luno, 185.

- “Ideal love can’t be achieved... You can never win... Every traditional romance is a tragedy...”
- “No matter how close I get to the loved one, I can still feel my separation, my essential isolation... It’s only in death that the lovers can be one forever... Death as the beginning of the union...”
- Romantic love is advertising... Flowers... Nice dinners... It’s sweet...but women won’t fuck those guys...
- “I don’t understand what I can get from marriage... Whereas to a woman, marriage is like winning the lottery...”
- “People don’t really want relationships, they want value...”
- “Attention to a woman is like sex to a man...”
- Dating advice? “High hopes, low expectations.”

2. On pornography and [part 2 of the interview with Sadia Khan](#)

Most of what he is must remain outside her.
– Bianco Luno³

Khan makes a point of singling out pornography as detrimental to male perceptions of women, as have many Second Wave feminists, notably [Catherine A. MacKinnon](#) and [Andrea Dworkin](#). That there is a relation between susceptibility to porn and how men view women is, I think, correct. That it can be implicated in the abuse of women and their depreciation in the minds of some men is also likely – along with a host of other things. Women do not view pornography in the same way as men. Other, emotionally more complex, experiences – soap operas, social media, romance novels, etc. – stimulate and offer comparable release for women. The two-dimensional flattening of the female form characteristic of pornography, in contrast, will seem impoverished. It probably is.

But it is a mistake to suggest that it could be entirely otherwise as some of these critical observations imply: that a man could somehow become a woman’s equal at sensually multivariate, holistic, sexual experience, as though this male trait was merely a malleable social construction. Khan and company seem to assume too much similarity, too much interchangeability – or the potential for such – between female and male sexual phenomenology. Clothing against her skin does *not* feel the same to her as his does to him... nor anything else in human experience, for that matter.

Men do not experience *anything* the same as women. Both are mortal, both bleed... yes, but even these basic things are not comparable experiences. Bleeding for a time becomes a monthly ritual for a woman. Bleeding, except from an ominous or mortal wound, is never routine for a man. Men extract blood from bodies in other ways. Men court death. Women don’t. Men know in their bones that when push comes to shove, and someone must be sacrificed, it will be *them*, the sex with external genitalia.

3. From, *leçons en ténèbres*, forthcoming.

As an evolutionary sociologist once put it, a womb is worth a hundred penises. Survival of the species dictates this. A good part of male lives is spent rehearsing how they would comport themselves in the course of discharging their *final* duty⁴ – however scarce modern civilization may try to make the occasion.

Their vulnerability to visual stimulus is precisely the thing that makes men notice women *at all*. As Taraban notes, a man cannot appreciate a woman's personality in a photo. That she *has* a personality, that she is *more* than just her body, that she has potentially a depth perhaps he one day may come to appreciate and admire, these are not things she takes great pains to make perfectly evident to others. Her humanity is *not* something she is inclined – or trained – to put front and center. Perhaps, this is an effect, not a cause, of the “male gaze.” Likely, it is *both* simultaneously.

Men are visually vulnerable to feminine appearances. Women are objects of sexual arousal for men. Sexual arousal in men is *not* entirely a matter of a desire to procreate or further the species. It is *not* primarily about wishing to be a father that motivates their desire for sexual intercourse with women. Fathering is a more distant thought for him than mothering is for her. He may fuck other men, inanimate objects, imagined ones... No doubt, this relative nonchalance makes him *irresponsible*. No doubt, it is why Kant said morality (a specifically *male* enterprise, as he conceived it – the ideally self-imposed discipline *he* must master and on top of which *he* must construct *his* self-esteem) is a cure for a disease women don't get. Men need abstract principles to govern their abstract perceptions. Women, not so much. Nature conspires to make sexual experience less abstract for her. She must deal with the flesh and blood consequences of it.

The phenomenological *difference* between women and men is deep and pervasive.

But to retreat to the humbler biological observation relevant to Khan's remark about the significance of pornography for men: If men don't evacuate their seminal fluids regularly, either through sexual intercourse or masturbation,⁵ they [compromise their health](#). Stale semen is a suspected toxin and [potentially carcinogenic](#). It can be a precursor to prostate cancer. Not too differently from the role of breastfeeding has for the health of mothers, to [their susceptibility to breast cancer](#). Some of our bodily fluids seem meant to be released on pain of potentially dire health consequences. If a female is not available, some less than three-dimensionally and sensuously suboptimal, ersatz medium will have to do. It's either the folds of her flesh, a graphic substitute, or a vivid imagination. Abstraction, even some measure of dehumanization, is involved in all of them. Likely, more in the latter two, but even in the first (a point we will return to shortly).



Wallace Smith's illustration from Ben Hecht's [Fantazius Mallare: a mysterious oath \(1922\)](#)

4. This is what violent video games are about – not to mention wars, real and [fantasied](#) ones, etc... See also our discussion “[Boys kill](#).”

5. “[A brief history of masturbation](#),” *JSTOR*, note by Livia Gershon.

Centuries ago, Immanuel Kant argued that sexual intercourse was *inherently* dehumanizing: you cannot fully appreciate what is most rare, precious, and beautiful about another human being *while fucking them*.⁶ In that moment, you and the other are *just* animals.⁷ A *man* can't, that is. And if a woman *may*, this further underscores how even the conception of *what a human being is* is sexed. It depends.

There is something to be said for doing it the old fashioned way. For using non-material jack-off aids that require the exercise of counterfactuals. To *fantasize*. Early in our evolution it was the ones who develop the skills to *imagine* what was *not* true, real, or present that prepared themselves better for what *might, but isn't, at the moment*, the case – imagining a better world than the one we find ourselves in, for example. The capacity to cope with absence or loss by imagining unrealized, but *possible* worlds, has proved essential to all that we think of as “progress.”⁸ Animals don't do this except in *evolutionary* time, not at the lightening pace of *cultural* time. This ability to *imagine* what is not – but *might be* – the case, is what makes us special. For *both* better *and* worse.

Pornography is a technology, like a smart phone, not strictly necessary for survival. Indeed, it may be unhealthy in the way fast food is. Communication that took longer perhaps afforded more time to consider what the other might be thinking. Imagination, more than intelligence, separates us from animals. So anything that discourages opportunities for exercising imagination is a step toward dehumanization. So, in this sense, we can agree with Khan and company. All technologies serve to move us forward in *this* respect (they save time and resources) and backward in *that* (what we *were* is eroded through our dependence on them).⁹

But what is “forward” and what is “backward” is to be determined by what exactly we think our business here is. That is *the* philosophical question.

...

We are *not* intent on doing therapy here. This is philosophy, not psychotherapy. If you manage to derive any useful insights for coping with a personal concern, good. But we are not trying to make this a better world or people healthier. Philosophers are perverse in wanting to understand *the way things are*, independently of whether any human good comes of that understanding. As always, *you* will have to supply your agenda. Nature is fickle and does not supply any.

6. It is why “fuck you” is not an expression of endearment.

7. If he rises above this, it manifests in what comes *before* and *after* the act. It is never *only* about sex for a man, except in the pathological case, but it *is* the door to a man's heart. (If she has his heart, contrary to the old saw, he will enjoy whatever crap she cooks.)

8. We are working on a future topic that will relate AI, sex, death, irony, and the origin and nature of reflective consciousness – and a very ancient myth (for good measure).

9. The difference between fucking and “making love” is the *effort* of imagination in the act of doing the latter. “Making love” is an attempt to do the impossible: a singular act of humanity. The rest any animal may do as well or better. For more on the phenomenological mechanics of this, see, for instance, [Abi Doukan's lecture](#). It is “impossible” because of *the self-deception that dogs consciousness*. It is “human” because of the desire to transcend animality. There may be *both* humiliation *and* exultation in the act – *first*, humiliation... We will have more to say on this theme later when we discuss the origin and nature of *reflective consciousness* and what sex and imagination have to do with them.

3. “The humiliated self exulted”

A commentator to one of Taraban’s interviews wrote, “The only thing a woman can truly offer me is sex, and after that I’d like to get back to being focused on what I’m doing without distractions. The relationships I’ve dealt with were burdensome, expensive, and a waste of time...” My reaction to this is that the man is bitter over having had – and lost – some emotional connection with a woman. In which case, this attitude is probably temporary, a case of sour grapes.

That, *or*, if a settled orientation, then some measure of psychopathy is involved. Sex is a major drive for men, certainly: it gets them interested and involved (as Taraban says), but it is not incompatible with wanting and needing an emotional connection as well – in the *normal* case. In that case, sex is risky for a man, not because he will be physically compromised as a woman may, but because he plays with losing his invulnerability, a special point of pride for him. Emotional fetters threaten.

For a man to say it is the “only” thing he wants indicates invulnerability to feelings of attachment – or, rather, in the typical case, a *boast* to that effect. If it is more than a boast, he has no capacity for placing the other on the same level as himself, let alone, above. He is infinitely distant from “exulting his humiliated self.” A psychopath is not evil, just a natural phenomenon – to be avoided, if possible, like “an act of God.” A humiliated self is *just* humiliated, for him, and a bad thing to be. Such exultation is unfathomable madness to him. Someone capable of, at least, grasping the concept of “exulting a humiliated self” can’t be interested in *only* sex.

Sex gets men in the door and vulnerable to an attachment beyond mere sex. It doesn’t guarantee the attachment, but it can make him vulnerable. Courage for him consists in *knowingly* embracing this vulnerability, rather than noticing after the fact, and facing the subsequent bitterness at his own stupidity.

The attachment connected with the purest kind of love, *unrequited* love, is beyond sex, beyond attachment, beyond hope of reciprocation, beyond “health” or self-preservation, *beyond everything...* except the good of the loved one. A love like this that endures is, needless to say, rare – or, at least, if more common, a point of embarrassment because an admission of haplessness.

4. From Anne Carson’s *Eros the Bittersweet – an essay*

We may, in the traditional terminology of erotic theorizing, refer to this structure as a love triangle and we may be tempted, with post-Romantic asperity, to dismiss it as a ruse. But the ruse of the triangle is not a trivial mental maneuver. We see in it the radical constitution of desire. For, where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved and that which comes between them. They are three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationship, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching.

Conjoined they are held apart. The third component plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros. When the circuit-points connect, perception leaps. And something becomes visible, on the triangular path where volts are moving, that would not be visible without the three-part structure. The difference between what is and what could be is visible. The ideal is

projected on a screen of the actual, in a kind of stereoscopy. The man sits like a god, the poet almost dies: two poles of response within the same desiring mind. Triangulation makes both present at once by a shift of distance, replacing erotic action with a ruse of heart and language. For in this dance the people do not move. Desire moves. Eros is a verb.

5. Music

Two ecstatic love songs:

- [Honoré d'Ambrus - Le Doux silence de nos bois](#)
- [À Chloris - HAHN par Lea Desandre - Révélation 2017 par France musique](#)

and one not so much:

- [Lewis/Randy Duke - It's A Frail Thing](#)



*Extended writeup for the topic hosted at
[The Philosophy Club](#) in January 2025
Accessible at [Archive.org](#)*

*– Victor Muñoz
Guanajuato / Seattle*